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SUBJECT: MAYOR'S RACE A TOSS-UP IN ECUADOR'S THIRD CITY

1. Summary. The Cuenca mayoral race is too close to call between two strong candidates, Fernando Cordero (New City-Pachakutik alliance), the incumbent, and Marcelo Cabrera (Democratic Left), recently the provincial prefect of Azuay. Meanwhile, Xavier Munoz, of Popular Democracy is the clear front-runner for prefect of Azuay. The mayoral race in Ecuador's third largest city is interesting because it pits two popular incumbents against each other. End Summary.

Background Information

2. PolOff visited Cuenca, provincial capital of Azuay province September 30-October 1 for meetings with local election officials, party officials and an NGO (independent electoral observer). Cuenca, a charming town with distinguished colonial architecture best known for the Panama hats woven there, is also the third largest city in Ecuador, located in the southern Sierra region. Azuay province has a serious out-migration problem with many towns depopulated of working aged men who have emigrated to the US and Spain. Azuay has a total of 447,587 eligible voters (5.2% of the national total) who will vote on October 17 to select a provincial prefect (U.S. governor-equivalent), 5 provincial councilors, 15 mayors, 64 municipal councilors and 59 rural councils. Electoral officials predicted 30% absenteeism on election day in Azuay province.

Mayoral Race Close

3. The mayoral race is too close to call between the incumbent, Fernando Cordero of the New City party (allied with Pachakutik) and Marcelo Cabrera, of the Democratic Left (ID) party. Cabrera has served as Prefect of Azuay Province for the last 8 years. Electoral watchdog NGO Citizens Participation charged both candidates with posting signs on public works, a violation of campaign rules. In response, Cordero's campaign coordinator, Gabriel Ledesma, blamed undisciplined supporters for the infraction. Cabrera subsequently took down his signs.

4. New City campaign coordinator Gabriel Ledesma told PolOff that Ecuador had suffered through 25 years of "party-ocracy." Ledesma described New City as different in that it does not make promises and had no party doctrine. In fact, New City is not a party, but a local movement which has allied with the Pachakutik party. While the Democratic Left accuses Cordero of concentrating power in himself, Ledesma pointed out that Cordero had passed 173 ordinances in cooperation with the city council (showing he could work with others) versus one ordinance passed by Prefect Cabrera. Ledesma accused Cabrera of corruption in contracts for public works.

5. Orlando Albornoz, campaign manager of the ID in Cuenca, emphasized that the ID is an ideologically-based party and as eager to pronounce on local and national issues. He argued that without the structure of a party, politicians are not accountable for their actions. Albornoz echoed Munoz' public statements in favor of greater decentralization of taxing authority. Azuay province needs more power to directly administer projects, such as new roads, he said. Albornoz said Ecuador should work with international organizations such as the World Bank and Inter-American Bank to fund development projects. He also felt the US should look to Latin America first for allies. Albornoz worried that Ecuadorian markets would be invaded by American products should an FTA be signed.

6. There are also two well-respected female candidates for mayor, Susana Gonzalez, a former President of Congress (of the For Cuenca Party) and Angelica Garcia of President Gutierrez' Patriotic Society Party). The Supreme Electoral Tribunal requires parties to allocate at least 40% of its candidate lists to women. There are no female candidates for Prefect of Azuay.

Munoz the Favorite in Prefect Race

7. Xavier Munoz (Popular Democracy Party), a former mayor, prefect and Congressman, stood out as the clear favorite in the race for Prefect of Azuay province. Paul Carrasco of the Democratic Left Party (ID) and Paul Granda of the New City-Pachakutik alliance trailed Munoz in the polls. PolOff

attended a forum of the candidates for prefect organized by Citizens Participation. All but Carrasco attended. A key theme all candidates mentioned was the need for a better highway system in Azuay province. Granda argued a better road system was linked with improvements in the economy health, education and tourism. Granda also felt these improvements could stem the serious migration problem in Azuay province. There were no other concrete solutions to migration presented. Munoz instead proposed Congressional reforms to allow local governments to make use of income taxes to increase municipal autonomy from the central government.

Citizen Participation Will Monitor Elections

18. Citizens Participation (PC) regional coordinator told PolOff that PC will have 500 volunteers monitoring elections on October 17. These volunteers are aged 16-18 and represent ten public and private schools. On October 2, a practice session was held for the volunteers. Rodas touted PC's sponsorship of the candidate forums as an important service to voters. He described the meetings as civil, with no personal attacks. (PolOff confirmed this at the session she attended.) The forums have good turnout and were broadcast on the radio. Previously, prefect candidate Munoz had been attacked for his relationship with unpopular former President Mahuad.

Electronic Vote to be Tested

19. The town of Totoracocha, with 12,724 eligible voters, has received 80 electronic voting booths, lent to the GoE by the Government of Brazil. Thirty-seven of the machines will be used for voters to practice and forty-three will be used for voting on election day. Each machine will be used by about 300 people. (Voting booths are divided by gender; Totoracocha has 20 male booths and 23 female booths.) Voters will not be allowed to vote electronically unless they have a certificate proving that they have received prior training. According to Dr. Jorge Moreno, President of the Provincial Electoral Tribunal, as of September 30, 7,000 of the eligible voters had received the necessary training. From October 1-15, additional training sessions will be offered. Voters will also be able to practice on 30 machines on election day. The Provincial Electoral Tribunal has been handing out flyers door-to-door and using cars with loudspeakers to announce the practice days and locations.

10. According to Moreno, minor parties such as New City and For Cuenca have complained to the Provincial Electoral Tribunal that voters can only see the majority party logos on the electronic screen. Minority parties fear this could influence voters on election day. Ledesma said that this omission in the test voting machines could cause confusion on election day, putting the votes of approximately 5% of Azuay voters into question. Albornoz also feared electronic voting could permit fraud through electronic manipulation. Post expects the OAS to field a team of electoral observers to the province.

Comment

11. The election in Cuenca is interesting because it pits two popular incumbents - one from a major established party (ID) and one running against what established parties represent. A Cordero win would reflect growing public disenchantment with politics as usual. Conversely, a Cabrera win would reinforce the ID's strength in the province and nationally.

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